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AUTHOR Peterson, Karen L.; Gustavsen, Melodie G.
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ABSTRACT

Exploring issues of content and construct validity, this paper reviews how empathy in young children has been defined and measured. Discussion first focuses on empathy viewed as an affective awareness and response to the feelings of another person. The review reports research using the Affective Situation Test, naturalistic studies of affective empathy, and gender differences in the structure of the empathic response. Subsequent discussion explores the view that empathy results from a cognitive understanding of another person's feelings or thoughts. Particular attention is given to the influence of egocentricism and decentering on children's capacity for empathy; the influence of children's verbal and cognitive limitations on the measurement of empathy; self-, normative-, and differential-judgment in young children's empathic response; and the influence of children's developing awareness of situational cues on their ability to judge emotional expression. Concluding remarks recommend a developmental framework for studying empathy which includes the ideas that (1) children are probably affectively aware of the emotions of others long before they are cognitively aware; (2) differences between empathic responses in clinical versus natural settings should be considered; and (3) because empathy and role-taking abilities increase with age, studies should be made of both preschool and school-age children and further studies should be made to ascertain how empathy may be affected by gender. (A seven-page reference list concludes the document.) (RH)

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Empathy in Young Children: Defining and Evaluating

Karen L. Peterson and Melodie G. Gustavsen

Washington State University

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Abstract

The present paper examines aspects of the development of empathy in young children. Particular emphasis is placed on how empathy has been defined and evaluated in research studies. Empathy is viewed from both the affective and cognitive perspectives with consideration given measurement issues within each perspective. A developmental framework for studying empathy is proposed.

Empathy in Young Children: Defining and Evaluating

Theorists and researchers have proposed that empathy plays an important role in both social and personality development. They have speculated that people who empathize will be more motivated toward prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, helping and altruism (Allen, 1979; Buckley, Siegel, & Ness, 1979; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Eisenberg-Berg & Geisheker, 1979; Hoffman, 1976; Iannotti, 1985; Johnson, 1975; Krebs, 1975; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). Being able to recognize, understand, and take the affective perspective of others may increase the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships (Marcus, 1980; Rothenberg, 1970). Furthermore, thinking about the consequences of hurting another person and/or feeling the distress of another person may inhibit aggression and increase resistance to temptation (Ellis, 1982; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Iannotti, 1978; Krebs, 1975; Kurdek, 1978; Kurtz & Eisenberg, 1983; LaVoie, 1974; Rothenberg, 1974). In addition, the ability to form and maintain social relationships may subsequently influence personality development, particularly the development of self-concept and self-esteem.

The purpose of this paper is to review how empathy has been defined and subsequently measured. The measurement issue is related to the researchers' view or definition of 'empathy' and thus the nature of the subsequent measurement. This is clearly a methodological issue of assessing both content and construct

validity. The point of debate among theorists and researchers consists of defining empathy as primarily a cognitive awareness of another's feelings as opposed to the perspective of defining empathy as the ability to perceive how another feels and further feel the same emotion as another. Feshbach (1975) explains there is "confusion between process and product . . . it is possible to conceptualize empathy as a cognitive product mediated by emotional factors or as an affective response mediated by cognitive processes" (p. 25).

The assessment of empathy must also consider how empathy may be distinguished from other similar behavioral constructs such as identification, projection, sympathy and role-taking (Ianotti, 1975; 1985). Further it is necessary to make the distinctions between empathy and these other constructs as part of a total empathic response (Iannotti, 1975). Most importantly, how is the "same feeling" state of an emphatic response acquired and subsequently generalized to other situations. If empathy is in fact a behavioral response derived from the integration of multiple components, the assessment of this entity must consider the relative existence of empathy across various settings. This requires consideration be given to defining the construct from one of two perspectives. The perspective of those supporting the affective position (e.g., feeling the emotion prior to action) and that of the cognitive perspective (e.g., comprehending/thinking first before responding) will be considered.

Affective Perspective

One definitional perspective is to view empathy as an affective awareness and response to the feelings of another person. This view maintains that it is not enough to cognitively understand how others feel, but one must "feel with them." To measure affective empathy, Feshbach and Roe (1968) developed the Affective Situation Test. In this test children are presented with a series of slides and told a brief story about a situation. Although the story characters exhibit facial expressions consistent with the situation, the emotions they display are not identified. After each story, children are asked "How do you feel?" If their emotion matches the emotion of the story character, it is determined they have responded empathically.

Several studies have been conducted using the Affective Situation Test (Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Hoffman & Levine, 1976; Kalliopuska, 1984a, 1984b; Marcus, 1980). These studies have found similar trends in the development of empathy: (a) affective empathy tends to increase with age; (b) young children are first able to give a "global, less differentiated" empathic response (such as 'I feel bad') before a precise, well articulated response (such as 'I feel sad') (Marcus, 1980); (c) young children are more able to respond empathically to happy feelings than sad feelings; (d) children are most able to respond empathically to similar story characters (same gender, same race); (e) although findings on gender differences contain

inconsistencies, there is a general tendency for females to show more affective empathy than males (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Feshbach & Roe, 1969; Hoffman, 1976, 1977).

Another smaller group of studies has attempted to look at affective empathy occurring in natural settings. Marcus (1980) has suggested empathy may be expressed by non-verbal behaviors such as listening, cessation of activity, and moving closer. He both observed children and presented them with the Affective Situation Test (Feshbach & Roe, 1968) and a second empathy measure. The two measures of empathy correlated positively with the empathic non-verbal behaviors. He suggested these non-verbal behaviors may initiate friendship and to enhance popularity. In a related study, Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, and Cummings (1983) set up a simulation where children (4 years old through sixth grade) heard a tape-recorded infant crying in another room. The researchers observed the emotional responses and attempts to help and later asked children for self-reports of empathy. This self-report measure of affective empathy did not relate to observed prosocial actions. Similar work with preschool aged children by Strayer (1980) found children responded appropriately to emotional situations without adult intervention. These findings suggest preschool children are aware of other children's feelings and can respond appropriately.

Theorists have traditionally proposed that females are more aware of emotions than males (Feshbach, 1975, 1982; Hoffman, 1977,

Johnson, 1963; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Many have suggested that females are socialized to express empathy, compassion, and altruism while males are encouraged to acquire instrumental traits such as problem solving. Research, however, has failed to support this theoretical proposition (Feshback, 1982; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

Hoffman (1977) suggests cognitive empathy and affective empathy need to be considered separately in connection with gender differences. In considering the components of affective empathy as a shared emotional response, females often have scored significantly higher. Females are more apt to have a vicarious emotional response accompanying their awareness. Females "may be more apt to imagine that what is happening to the other is happening to them" (Hoffman, p. 718). Thus, females may be more focused on the feelings of the other person. Males, on the other hand, have a greater tendency to consider action alternatives to the situation, rather than "feeling with" another person. These differing responses to the awareness of feelings should not be confused with awareness of emotion itself.

Cognitive Perspective

A second group of researchers have defined empathy as resulting from a cognitive understanding of another person's feelings or thoughts, specifically that thinking about a situation occurs prior to an emotional response. This indicates a selection of response rather than a simultaneous feeling or role-taking

state. Researchers within this group, however, disagree concerning what constitutes empathic understanding. This group considered issues related to concepts of egocentrism and decentering. In brief, it is suggested children under the age of seven are cognitively unaware other people have different thoughts and feelings. This is characterized by egocentric language especially seen in 3 to 5 year-olds and less often in 5 to 7 year-olds. The child "experiences the greatest difficulty in entering into anyone else's point of view" (Piaget, 1975/1929, p. 216). Closely related to the construct of egocentrism is the construct of centration: i.e., young children can consider only one aspect or dimension of an experience; their attention is "centered" (Ford, 1979). As children grow, they begin to consider sequentially more than one aspect of an experience and learn to consider the circumstances from the different perspectives of those involved. As a result, children begin to lose their egocentrism or egocentric perspective. It is not until the age of 9 to 11, however, when they can simultaneously consider several dimensions of an experience and are capable of conceptualizing an emphatic perspective.

Borke (1971) has suggested the complex verbal and perspective-taking methods used to measure empathy and role-taking were beyond the experience and cognitive abilities of young children. Young children may be aware of other's feelings but lack the ability to verbalize such awareness. In their studies,

Borke and Su (1972, 1973) found children had trouble giving the verbal label for the feeling but were able to identify representative states (facial expressions). Their findings indicated: (a) young children (ages 3 to 5) are aware other people have feelings and feelings vary according to the situation; (b) empathic ability and social sensitivity tend to increase with age; (c) young children are most able to identify happy feelings and least able to identify fear; (d) recognition of fear, sadness and anger may be influenced by social class and culture; and (e) gender differences are variable with situation and testing.

Borke's conclusions, however, have been criticized by other researchers who claim egocentric social roletaking was measured (Chandler & Greenspan, 1972; Shantz, 1975). Although young children can identify the feelings of others, they may do so by egocentric self-judgment (projection or identification) or by normative judgment. Children may determine how they would feel in such a situation and assume that another person would feel the same way (self-judgment) or may identify the feelings of others by the knowledge of how most people would feel in a certain situation (normative judgment). Self-judgment and normative judgment are based on the assumption that other people are similar to oneself, and thus they are egocentric. Simply being able to identify how another person feels may not imply the child can take the perspective of another person.

Reaffirming the cognitive perspective of initial

conceptualizing of a situation, researchers propose that empathy must be based on "differential judgment" or the ability to judge how an individual feels in a given situation (Shantz, 1975). Proponents of this perspective claim that to be truly nonegocentric a person must "anticipate what someone else might think or feel precisely when those thoughts and feelings are different from one's own" (Chandler & Greenspan, 1972, p. 105) and propose that to measure true role-taking ability (empathy) stories presented to young children must decrease the similarity between the child and story character and/or contain incongruent situations and emotional reactions by characters.

For example, Rothenberg (1970) had school aged children listen to tapes of simple adult conversations (dissimilar characters). Each conversation centered around a situation assumed to be unfamiliar to the child and involved a change in emotional state of one character. Rothenberg found a relationship between intelligence, age, and her measure of social sensitivity. Dimitrovsky (1964) also used tape recordings with non-situational content and found a significant increase in ability to identify emotions of dissimilar story characters (adults) with age. Work by Dimitrovsky (1964) and Rothenberg (1970) was conducted with school aged children and indicated an ability to decenter and comprehend simultaneous emotional states. However, no research of a similar design has been done with preschoolers.

Several studies have attempted to determine whether young

children can simultaneously decenter by incorporating two aspects of an interpersonal situation, an issue of integration and validity (Burns & Cavey, 1957; Chandler & Greenspan, 1972; Greenspan et al., 1976; Gove & Keating, 1979; Wiggers & VanLieshout, 1985; Wolman, Lewis, & King, 1972). Findings of these studies have indicated young children lack the ability to decenter and thus are considered unable to demonstrate empathy. As an explanation for this occurrence, Wiggers and VanLieshout (1985) have proposed "children infer emotion by centering on the situation (egocentrism) or on the expression (non-egocentrism)" (p. 339).

Harris and Olthof (1982) suggest that as children begin to sequentially focus on varying aspects of the situation, or different emotions within a situation, they begin to see discrepancies. Only then are they able to shift to understanding emotions as part of internal mental states that may vary within a situation and begin to simultaneously decenter and move away from an egocentric position.

Burns and Cavey (1957), Chandler and Greenspan (1972), Greenspan, Barenboim and Chandler (1976), Gove and Keating (1979), and Wiggers and VanLieshout (1985) all found young children focus on situational cues to identify the emotions of the story characters but were unable to accurately judge emotional expression until middle childhood. Older children, however, are able to decenter and consider both facial expressions and the

situation in identifying emotions. These findings may be best understood in light of the model for perspective taking proposed by Feffer (1970) and Feffer and Gourevitch (1960). He proposed three steps in role-taking based on the Piagetian construct of conservation, indicating at first young children (4-6 years) are egocentric (lack of decentration), children (ages 7-8 years) can decenter by focusing sequentially on different aspects of the situation (sequential decentration), and finally, around age 9, children can consider different aspects of the situation simultaneously (simultaneous decentration) and are then intellectually capable of generating an emphatic response.

Researchers who have measured empathy as a cognitive construct have suggested that there are no gender differences in cognitive empathy. Although females may be more likely to "share" an emotional response (affective empathy), males are equally able to assess how another person feels.

In summary, it is suggested that cognitive development involves both content and structural components (Iannotti, 1985; Urberg & Docherty, 1976). Children must have the understanding that certain situations result in certain feelings, that feelings can be expressed by facial cues and that other people have different feelings and thoughts. Children must also be able to perform the cognitive operations, such as decentering, necessary for role-taking (structure). Different tasks require the integration of different skills thus providing strong support for

the acquisition of a hierarchial role-taking system.

Conclusions

Researchers examining the development of empathy in young children do not agree on how to define empathy and subsequently use different methods to measure empathy. First, they disagree on whether empathy is a cognitive or affective response. Second, researchers on the cognitive components of empathy disagree on how to determine egocentric and decentric responses. Both groups do agree, however, that empathy increases with age. Young children are aware of emotions in others and can identify how people feel in normal situations. Preschool children are more able to identify and match emotions with similar story characters (a child of the same age and same gender). It is unclear when young children begin to recognize the emotions of dissimilar persons (adults). It is also unclear just when children develop the ability to consider two different emotional responses to the same situation.

As evidenced in this review, the development of empathy seems to be a "multistage interpersonal process" (Gladstein, 1983, p. 475) and involves both affective and cognitive components. The evaluation of empathy thus needs to consider elements of measuring both content and construct validity. One step in resolving the problems in defining and then measuring empathy may be to view empathy in a developmental framework that incorporates variables of both cognitive and emotional development. Cognitively, the

development of empathy involves moving from egocentric to decentered role-taking. Young children must first form object and person permanence and begin to have a sense that other people are distinct from themselves. Children can then learn simple role-taking and social comprehension of emotional states. By the age of 6 to 9, children become aware that people have identities that continue outside of the immediate situation. Children move from being able to focus on different aspects of a situation sequentially to simultaneous decentration. Given those conditions it appears a perspective or framework which considers normative change as the structural variable around which valid measurement should be is proposed below.

A developmental framework for studying empathy should incorporate the following constructs:

1. Children are probably affectively aware of the emotions of others long before they are cognitively aware (Hoffman, 1975). Several studies on young children and infants have found evidence that they share emotional states with others and use social referencing to regulate their own responses (Camras, 1977; Carr, Pabbs, & Carr, 1975; Cohn & Tronick, 1983; Greenspan & Greenspan, 1985; Hay, Nash, & Pederson, 1981; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Simner, 1971). As Erikson (1958) claims: "in truly significant matters people, and especially children, have a devastatingly clear if mostly unconscious perception of what other people really mean, and sooner or later royally reward real love or take well-aimed

revenge for implicit hate" (p. 210).

2. The assessment of empathy needs to consider differences between empathic responses in clinical versus natural settings. Many studies with preschool children contain problems related to ecological and predictive validity. Instruments may not measure awareness of emotions expressed in real-life situations. Measurements may be confounded by a child's shyness, verbal ability, or physical state. Further, measurements may not relate to behavior exhibited in natural settings (Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977).

3. Because of the strong tendency for empathy and role-taking abilities to increase with age, it is important to study the abilities of both preschool and school age children and to simultaneously consider that such abilities may be further affected by gender. Cultural dynamics and norms must be documented and evaluated in order to ascertain differences between ethnic groups (Borke, 1971, 1973; Borke & Su, 1972). It appears that the change of the gender of story characters may influence the ability of young children to identify emotions (i.e. young children appear more able to identify emotions of same gender characters (Feshbach, 1982).

Summary

This brief analysis indicates there is much more to the measurement of empathy than the documentation of recognition states and relationships. The capacity to recognize and verbalize

about emotions permits children a functional ability to interpret and alter interpersonal relations (Bretherton, et. al., 1986). The teaching of empathetic responses to social situations continues to be used in promoting prosocial behavior and as a means for reducing the effects of stress (Honig, 1986). Given this continued reliance on empathy as a highly desired response in young children's social interactions, it is important that both defined aspects of empathy, affective and cognitive, be clearly articulated and further examined. The issue is not whether empathy is either purely an affective or cognitive construct but how both dimensions interact and change with the developmental capabilities of the child. Finally, we need to learn more about how children learn to interpret emotional encounters and select a response which is a genuine reflecting of their feelings and understanding.

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Author Notes

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Authors' address: Department of Child and Family Studies, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-2010. Dr. Karen Peterson's telephone number is (509) 334-2758.